



Chapter Five

engaging
family, youth,
and community
members as
champions
for equity and
college and career
readiness

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Problem of Practice

How to engage families, community members, and youth as champions for equitable access to college and career readiness opportunities in the high school context, and in pathway programs specifically?

Abstract

A focal point of study at Stanford’s John W. Gardner Center is the implementation of community school models and family engagement strategies in public schools. This chapter explores the intersection between Linked Learning and the community schools movement, and discusses how schools in two California districts have undertaken concerted efforts to engage families and community partners, and to harness youth voice as a substantive strategy to facilitate equitable access to rigorous college and career ready learning for all students. While each school’s approach differs, they have both transformed their campuses into student-centered community schools—places where school staff, families, and community partners work together to offer a range of supports and opportunities to help students thrive. Additionally, each of these schools is a Linked Learning pathway site where leaders and teachers engage families as assets and partners in their students’ learning success. The chapter illustrates how these sites managed to disrupt entrenched modalities of schooling and create new mechanisms of greater collaboration, coherence, and commitment to support student learning in the high school context.

Introduction

Linked Learning is premised on the notion that students are more likely to be successful when they are engaged

in meaningful learning experiences. Yet, students often struggle with barriers to learning related to poverty, racism, immigrant status, and other challenges that emanate from within and beyond the school, and serve to perpetuate inequalities. Consequently, schools implementing rigorous quality pathways may still struggle with barriers to students’ participation and college success (Warner et al., 2016). While family involvement has been linked to positive outcomes for youth—especially for first generation college students—many schools struggle with engaging families in meaningful ways to support their children’s success. Supporting equitable outcomes for students—including equitable access to the benefits of quality pathway participation and future college and career success—requires a complex ecosystem of students, families, and the community.



Background

Family involvement in children’s learning has long been associated with increased academic achievement. In a child’s early years, parent involvement can be connected with increased literacy, communication, and school attendance (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). In a child’s middle and high school years, family involvement can influence student achievement, behavior, and social and emotional health, school persistence and drop-out, college readiness, and college success (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Jeynes, 2007; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006; Stormshak et al., 2009). Further, high schools’ outreach to parents can have significant and positive effects on parents’ involvement in their children’s education (Simon, 2004). Yet despite the known associations between parent involvement and student academic success, many schools struggle with finding appropriate mechanisms to engage with parents in the high school years. This difficulty can be compounded by differences in culture, language, and socio-economic status across families and school staff, resulting in school staff sometimes perceiving families as a barrier to students’ success, rather than an asset. For example, some parents may struggle with understanding their role in their child’s college application process, misunderstanding the importance of school attendance, or balancing urgent family needs with future opportunities for their children. Additionally, schools often struggle to understand the types of involvement that are meaningful to student success (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Hill, 2014). At the middle and high school levels, parents may be less likely to be involved in the classroom and/or school site volunteering; however, parents can continue to play important roles in supporting students’ academic success, maintaining high expectations for their students, and supporting college knowledge and readiness.

So how can a high school or program for adolescents and young adults engage families and young people in key pathway supports? And how can a school leverage community resources to mitigate the effects of poverty, racism, and entrenched inequalities on students’ life and school success? The pages that follow describe promising strategies currently underway in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). While each district and site differ in their approach to community schools and meaningful student and family engagement, they each offer compelling evidence of powerful supports for learning.

School Profiles

THE ACADEMY, OAKLAND

The Academy¹, opened in 2006, is a small public school in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) serving 475 students in grades 6 through 12. The Academy is located in a neighborhood characterized as having among the highest “community stressor” levels in Oakland in terms of incidents of violent crime, poverty, health outcomes, rates of incarceration, and truancy/suspension rates (School Profile, 2014-15). Almost all (97%) of the school’s student body qualify for free or reduced price lunch, and over 90% of students will be the first in their family to graduate from a four-year college. Approximately 85% of Academy students identify as Latinx, and 12% as African-American. In its short history, Academy has garnered attention in the district for its high rate of A-G (college prep) course completion, significant growth in AP class participation, and a consistently high level of parent participation.

The Academy was also one of the first schools in OUSD to implement Linked Learning pathways, as well as one of the district’s early adopting community schools. Two pathways, Business and Social Justice, are currently available to students in grades 10 through 12, and the Academy has established formal partnerships with programs such as BUILD, College Track, and Upward Bound that support pathway development and college prep. As a community school, the Academy strives to serve the whole child by coupling their academic program with support services, such as a school-based health clinic, legal and mental health services, and the Family and College Resource Center (FCRC). Additionally, they are constantly leveraging less formal community partnerships to support student success. Alumni also play a strong role in the school as peer mentors, club advisors and, the principal hopes, even future instructional staff.

Community schools are known for their innovative and systematic practices engaging families in their children’s learning, and the Academy is no exception. The Academy’s FCRC not only provides supports for families—for example, ESL classes, legal aid, food assistance, and computer access—but also involves families in their students’ college preparation as well, which is unique for a family resource center. The FCRC supports families through the college

¹ To respect the school and staff’s anonymity, this name is a pseudonym and the practices described may reflect composite characteristics, drawn from the author’s experience with other schools in Oakland.



application and admission process—for example, completing FAFSA forms, keeping on track with the application process, identifying and applying for scholarships and loans, communicating effectively with their child’s teachers, and ensuring they understand (and can access) what their child needs to be “college ready.” Additionally, the FCRC works to ensure all students are enrolled in meaningful summer learning opportunities and internships that match student interests, skill level, and aspirations. The staff are frequently building relationships with new partner organizations that are reflective of student interests and, correspondingly, support families in overcoming the barriers that might exist to access. For example, FCRC staff described helping families translate acceptance letters, recognize important deadlines, and navigate the public transportation system. As one FCRC staff member described:

“I’m continually seeing the barriers that get in the way of students accessing opportunities. And usually there are all these little misunderstandings. For example, a parent will say, ‘Oh, I thought I wasn’t supposed to call [the organization] until the 11th, but actually, they need to call before the 11th. Or maybe the letter arrives and the students’ name is misspelled, so the family doesn’t think it’s legit. It sounds so simple, but at the same time, that little detail makes the difference between the student getting the opportunity or not. And so from the outside, you might be like, ‘Oh, like the kids don’t care, the families don’t care. They don’t have any follow-through.’ But then from the inside, you see all these little things that can become big things or can make the difference between a student accessing something amazing or not.”

This work underscores the importance of including families in efforts to expand learning opportunities and pathway connections for students. By engaging with families, as well as the partner organizations, the FCRC works to minimize barriers and maximize access to opportunities for students.

Engaging with families can also support more systematic program change and improvement on behalf of students. At the Academy, for the last several years students with a GPA of less than 3.0 have been required to participate in afterschool enrichment and academic support. Initially, parents resisted this practice. However, school administrators worked with families to help them understand the value and importance of the extra time and, eventually, parents came to support and champion the practice. As the principal describes it:

“We have a relationship with the students and their families that, well, we can really [be blunt] with the kids and the parents and say, ‘We need this’ and they will respond.”

As one teacher reported:

“I don’t think the kids even know that they’re in afterschool, because it’s so seamlessly integrated.”

Staff actively strive to make campus a place that students want to be. As one teacher stated:

“For the majority [of students], this is where they want to spend their time. You can hold kids accountable because [the school] is something they want to be part of.”

At the Academy, engagement with families runs deep. In the words of the FCRC coordinator:

“You can’t think about family engagement or the FCRC without the history of how the Academy was established. When the district decided that small schools were the way to go, a group of teachers and parents sat together and dreamed up this school. Parents were at the table from day one, and not as window dressing. They gave input. They were stakeholders. Everything that the Academy is becoming has been and will be rooted in that history, and that practice continues.”

Parents have also been responsible for increasing school funding through advocacy efforts on local ballot measures, as well as advocacy with district staff that resulted in upgraded science classrooms. Whereas in many wealthy schools, parents play a role in fundraising for the school through the PTA, this can be more of a challenge in lower-income communities. As the FCRC coordinator stated:

“Our principal has such a deep understanding of kids, of learning, of instruction, of the community, and of politics. One thing she’s really big on right now is the political power of this parent community. In our community, over the course of the last year, the parents fundraised about \$2,000. That’s fantastic, but it doesn’t go very far in a school budget. But the parents in our school, by mobilizing around two big ballot measures, also brought in three quarters of a million dollars into our school budget! Our principal is really very clear about the political power of our families to bring real money and real resources, not just to our school but to the district.”

Lastly, engagement with families and youth can support some of the deeper, subtler work of supporting marginalized youth to access pathways and college success. Youth development research underscores the importance of cultivating positive social identities, school connectedness, and a sense of belonging as protective factors for young people (Lerner, 2009). Recent research highlights that youth need more than links to programs, opportunities, and institutions outside their neighborhoods; they also need strong supports *within* their community (McLaughlin, 2018). The Academy’s family and student engagement practices can create social connections and enduring bonds that youth need to sustain their success.

ESTEBAN E. TORRES HIGH SCHOOL CAMPUS, LOS ANGELES

The Torres High School campus, located in an unincorporated part of East Los Angeles County, is a cluster of five autonomous pilot schools within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Inaugurated in 2010, Torres was built as an entirely new campus—the first constructed in East Los Angeles in over 80 years. The Torres pilot schools were designed in collaboration with Los Angeles Education Partnership (LEAP) and community organizers such as Inner City Struggle (ICS), which have

shaped the schools’ development from the start. The Humanitas Academy of Arts and Technology (HAAT) is one of five separately run pilot schools that share the Torres campus. HAAT is a Title One school that serves 415 students in grades 9 through 12. The student body is 98% Latinx. HAAT uses an arts-based instructional model that offers students the opportunity to participate in challenging, interdisciplinary learning experiences organized around relevant themes. The model empowers students through project-based learning that encourages critical thinking, develops writing and verbal skills, and uses art media as an inspiration and focus. HAAT has active pathway linkages with the arts, including a strong partnership with East Los Angeles College, which has developed its outreach and student and family supports in collaboration with the HAAT community. HAAT is also a community school, providing a range of integrated student supports and emphasizing engagement with families.

The school actively supports students and families in exploring postsecondary school options. Students receive ongoing guidance and support relative to internship and pathway opportunities throughout their school career. According to a school staff member:

“It’s important for youth to know that there are opportunities for them, and to not leave it at that. So it’s the difference between saying, ‘Here are these opportunities, good luck!’ versus really walking with you every step of the way. If you’re not ready now, then come back later. We think all kids do best with this approach, not just the kids at our school.”

Including family engagement and youth voice as an integrated strategy has been beneficial at HAAT. Over time, HAAT staff and internship providers have learned that their ideas of opportunities may not always match up with the reality of students’ lives. For example, participating in an exciting internship that ends late in the evening requires that student interns have cars, or that parents are available to pick them up, and neither may be the case. So, the school works with students and families around all details of the internship to ensure that students can access opportunities. Transportation can be a challenge for families in the community, so HAAT also intentionally and systematically educates its students to utilize public transportation. About a quarter of HAAT fieldtrips involve public transportation to get to the class’s destination.



Additionally, students receive particular support engaging with their parents around college decisions. Early on in the school's history, staff realized that many students struggled with communicating with their parents about paying for college or considering colleges far from home. The school developed mechanisms to support students with these conversations in ways that balanced respecting their families' experience with articulating their own dreams and aspirations. As one student described:

"It helped give me language to talk to my parents about why I wanted to attend a private school more than an hour's drive away. I told my parents about how much I appreciated all they had done to give me opportunities, and that now it was my turn to pay back their sacrifice."

Another noteworthy feature of HAAT is its innovative peer mentoring program. Initiated with support from LEAP, the program provides a structure for youth voice, leadership, and peer support. The 15-20 peer mentors at HAAT handle many of the schools' discipline issues through restorative justice practices, which the principal credits for the decreasing demands on her time for disciplinary issues. According to the principal, she now spends 10% of her time or less on discipline.

Another strand of the school's work is supporting students in how to talk to their parents about a career in the arts. The school provides short, readable documents with FAQs and key facts about the economic viability of the field as either a generalizable learning opportunity or a career pathway, and they organize visits to college arts programs for parents with, and without, their students. HAAT also provides practical information about the local arts industry, and shares labor-market research outlining demand and salary in the arts.

The staff also work to leverage community resources to provide students informal but exemplary access to an arts and culture experience. By the end of high school, all students will have attended professional performances and shows in major areas (e.g., opera, theater, etc.). The staff make it possible for parents to attend performances, as well. According to the principal:

"By the time students graduate, they've seen theatre, concerts, dance/ballet, television studies. [These opportunities communicate] the message: this is your community, you belong. Art is not a privilege, it's a right. We take parents and students to the LA opera on dress rehearsal night. They do a workshop and tour with students. We've had Placido Domingo come to the school. The LA Opera pays for the internship themselves, as part of their diversity pipeline. Students have had lunch with agents at House of Blues."

Through strategic partnerships and intentional strategies to engage parents in the pathway, college, and career process, HAAT has expanded the way students are supported in their learning experiences and future success. The youth and family engagement additionally serve to bolster social bonds, supporting students' ability to leverage and sustain the "bridging" opportunities that pathways provide.

Stand-Out Engagement Strategies

This section highlights key strategies that span the two schools. The examples of particular practices associated with these strategies are not meant to be exhaustive; rather, they provide examples of an approach to engaging family, youth, and community in Linked Learning pathways.

INVOLVING STUDENTS IN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Within the Linked Learning approach, students are not just passive recipients of knowledge, but active participants in the learning process (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2016). As students construct their own meanings, goals, and strategies, and actively monitor their progress, they become more aware of what they know, what they still need to learn, where they need help, and what resources they can leverage to overcome obstacles to learning. Both of the pathway schools profiled here have extended that “learning self-regulation” to their work with families. This is evident in the HAAT practice of student-led teacher-parent conferences, bolstered with support from one of the school’s community partners, the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP). Ellen Pais, President of LAEP, describes the following:

“We’ve been trying to build student-led conferences into our work across multiple schools. It allows students to talk about the curriculum, their vision for themselves, what they see themselves doing well, what supports they need. We want to change the relationship between students and their parents and their education. In this way, the parents and students are actually forced to talk about what does it mean to be in ninth grade at this school. What excites you about this? What doesn’t excite you? We provide supports to the teachers on how to support their students to be ready. The parent participation is really high because they don’t usually talk to their student about this kind of thing.”

Structuring opportunities for students to articulate their goals, interests, challenges, and progress has many benefits to their own learning journey and development. Including their families in their journey connects parents to the core academic work of the school, engaging them as partners and allies in students’ learning success. As students navigate the world of internships, high school course selection, and college preparation, parents travel with them in a student-led process. As Pais noted above, parents are excited to talk with their students about their goals, dreams, and progress. Students have the opportunity to “bridge their worlds” by including parents in their academic and career journey. Parent-teacher conferences become sites of engagement for the whole family, and a strong illustration of involving students in family engagement. Similar approaches can be adopted and applied to other areas involving parents—for

example, pathway orientations, college preparation events, or internship-related activities.

MOVING FROM RANDOM ACTS TO SYSTEMATIC, INTEGRATED, AND RESPONSIVE ENGAGEMENT

Recent research has highlighted the disjuncture between school staff’s views of what constitutes parental involvement in education with families’ own views (Zarate, 2007; Westrich & Strobel, 2012). Family engagement efforts in schools often focus on increasing parents’ on-campus participation in school events or, more recently in California, meeting state LCAP requirements for parent involvement. These efforts are often random or piecemeal, rather than coordinated and ongoing. Meaningful family engagement is *systematic*: a core component of system-wide endeavors and strategies (for example, college readiness activities). It is *integrated*: embedded into the goals, structures and processes of the organization, not just the job of one person such as a “family liaison” or “outreach coordinator.” It is *culturally responsive and strength-based*: honoring families’ assets and responding to their unique contexts. And, it is *linked to learning*: efforts to engage families should be tightly linked to supporting and enhancing their students’ educational journeys.

Both of the pathway schools highlighted in this chapter engender systematic, integrated, and culturally responsive forms of engagement tightly linked to learning. The principals at each site have developed thoughtful strategies to engage with families across all domains of the school’s work. Family engagement is integrated into pathway goals, structures, and processes—for example, internship placements, teacher-parent conferences, and college readiness coaching. Staff at both sites have been explicit and steadfast in their commitment to “meet families where they are,” leverage families’ strengths, and, as much as they can, serve as “translators” as students and families interact with systems that may be unfamiliar or unfriendly based on families’ own educational experiences. Lastly, family engagement efforts across the schools are explicitly linked to specific student learning goals. In this way, these two schools have moved beyond “random acts of engagement” to authentic and meaningful family engagement.

LEVERAGING COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS AS PARTNERS

The experience of the schools profiled in this chapter illustrates a powerful potential partner to bolster meaningful and authentic family engagement: community organizers.

While many schools have become accustomed to engaging community partnerships to provide afterschool programs, internships, and integrated student supports on campus, community organizers can be unique, unexpected partners in schools' efforts to catalyze their work with families. In both schools, community organizers played key roles in helping school leadership think strategically about family outreach, systems change, and political power. At the Academy, an Oakland community organizing entity helped to mobilize parents in the school's design, build staff capacity to forge relationships with parents, and create the structures, systems, and practices to sustain meaningful family engagement over time. At HAAT, Inner City Struggle provided similar critical strategy and sustained support.

Community organizers are grounded in the local community. Their staff often reflect the demographics of the neighborhood. They are closely attuned to families needs, strengths, and experiences and can translate those for school staff. They are often more nimble than schools and districts—for example, they may be able to adjust programming or reallocate resources as needs shift. Community organizers can be particularly effective in helping schools work with families to develop shared vision and goals. For example, at the Academy, community organizers created a space for parents to articulate their vision of a first-rate college preparatory school.



Additionally, community organizers can bolster families' confidence and leadership abilities to advocate for school and district change. As the principals of both schools profiled here noted, families can be critical catalysts for change, especially when it is untenable or impolitic for school staff to play that role—for example, lobbying the district for greater school resources or challenging a district-driven decision. Further, a community organizer's work with families typically is grounded in a leadership and empowerment model. As families engage as change agents, their leadership abilities are enhanced, they become stronger contributors to their children, their children's schools, and their community, ultimately generating broader connections and strengthening the social fabric of their children's environment.

Community Schools: A Framework for Student Supports and Meaningful Family Engagement

Both the Academy and HAAT are community schools, which are built on the premise that school resources alone may not be sufficient to ensure students' equitable access to learning and pathway success. As such, community schools engage with community partners to provide integrated student supports that can remove barriers to learning and enhance the quality of learning time. Linked Learning pathways already engage partner organizations in students' academic, technical, and workplace learning (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2016). The community school approach provides a framework for incorporating integrated student supports and families engagement as part of the students' experience in Linked Learning pathway development. The schools described in this chapter showcase several cross-cutting features of community schools that, taken together, foster a coherent and supportive experience for students engaged in Linked Learning pathways.

COMPREHENSIVENESS

A guiding tenet of both schools profiled here is that, as community schools, they offer some degree of comprehensive supports and opportunities to students and their families. These supports ranging from health clinics and mental health supports, to expanded learning and enrichment opportunities, to family support services and leadership development. Across both schools in this case study, partner organizations provided critical resources to

help meet comprehensive student needs—including shifting entrenched school practices to engage families in their children’s educational decision-making and success.

COLLABORATION

For schools to be more than a collection of services co-located on a school site, there must be extensive collaboration across stakeholders. Each of the sites profiled here provided multiple examples of ongoing and structured collaboration, including involving stakeholders through outreach, relationship-building, and shared leadership. As one principal stated:

“(Our partners) are behind every single initiative that we do that I would say falls under community schools.... It’s not there’s (partner organization) and (name of school), it’s (partner organization) at (school). We’re just one team. So, I never think of [so and so], any of that team as an outside agency coming in. They’re the core of our school.”

A strong principal setting the tone that partners belonged at the table and a dedicated community school manager helped ensure both the spirit and structures required to facilitate ongoing, meaningful collaboration among teachers, partners, and families. This cross-sector collaboration ensures that students are receiving needed services (for example, it decreases the likelihood of service gaps or duplication). Additionally, the trusting relationships required for collaboration are a prerequisite for alignment and coherence-building, as discussed below.

COHERENCE

Coherence refers to the extent to which all facets of a student’s education experience (e.g., school staff, expanded learning time, family, support services, etc.) are aligned towards a shared vision and goals. In the pathway schools we examined, partner resources were aligned with specific school and student learning goals. Health partners are leveraged to meet concrete student health needs—for example, providing glasses so students can better see their lessons or reduce student absence for doctor’s appointments. Pathway partners can provide students with enrichment experiences targeted to specific opportunities and needs—for example, exposure to arts and cultural events they wouldn’t previously have had, aligned with the opportunity to develop rich civic identities. Engaging with families can help align

arguably two of the most important spheres in the students’ life—their home life and their school experience—and in the meantime, cultivate important assets to support students’ future college and career success.

In both OUSD and LAUSD schools, a dedicated community school manager, as well as principal leadership and support were essential to building coherence across school, partner, and family domains. This collaboration enhanced the principal’s ability to cultivate a clear vision and communicate effectively about school goals with partner stakeholders. The community school manager worked with partners to ensure that efforts are aligned with school goals and that all parties regularly assess the partnerships. For example, at one of the schools, the community school manager worked with afterschool program and instructional staff to align afterschool and school-day instruction. She did this by involving the principal in beginning of the year “kick-off” meetings with program partners, regularly updating the partners on the school’s academic goals and student progress, and facilitating weekly check-ins between program staff and teachers to coordinate instruction.

Aligning partner and school activities often requires bridging organizational cultures and disrupting historical siloes. Once again, the principal plays an important role in shifting old habits and culture. In the words of one community school manager:

“I think our partners do really hard work just because they know it’s important, without always knowing the bigger “why” behind it. But I do believe it’s time for them to start knowing the bigger why.”

The school can play an important role in creating a more coherent experience for students by engaging with partners and families around shared goals.

COMMITMENT

Together, these family, youth, and community engagement strategies build a robust ecosystem of individuals and organizations dedicated to sustaining the relationships, practices, and structures required to support student success. The long-term partnerships observed in both OUSD and LAUSD sites span far beyond particular funding cycles or grant years. Rather, they represent an enduring commitment to engage in the difficult work of relationship-building. It also often required shifting entrenched cultures, structures,

and siloes to help students succeed. This type of commitment does not grow overnight; rather, it was the result of many years of trust-building, collaboration, and shared struggle.

Benefits

The family engagement and community school work described here offers a unique opportunity to enhance student supports and reinforce key functions of Linked Learning pathways. It strengthens the schools' teaching and learning mission. It fosters a coherent student experience. And ultimately, it can facilitate a successful transitions to postsecondary, career, and community life. Teachers, in particular, have expressed great appreciation for the community schools approach. In the words of one teacher:

"[At a community school], you don't have to be social workers or coaches. You don't have to worry that you don't have those resources because we have partners."

In community schools, teachers are able to reduce the number of hats they wear, dedicate more time for instruction, and enjoy better classroom environments due to classroom supports. While Linked Learning pathways can present a powerful mechanism for supporting student access to quality learning, they may not be sufficient to address the challenges engendered by poverty, racism, and entrenched inequalities. But, by leveraging community resources and engaging



parents as assets in their students' success, the schools described here present a set of innovative strategies to deepen the work for educational equity.

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This chapter is part of a guidebook, made possible by a grant from the James Irvine Foundation, on integrated student supports for college and career readiness. The guidebook offers seven illustrative profiles of educators and their partners in California high schools who are working collaboratively to develop comprehensive student supports that “link together” a rigorous academic curriculum, technical education, and workplace opportunities into a coherent learning experience for every youth in their school.